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ABSTRACT

Isocrates of ancient Greece attempted to create a wise and educated person in his school, not just an orator. His philosophy centered around the fact that teaching speech is not an exact science, but an art of opinions and beliefs that will educate the student to make sensible choices in life and speech, demonstrate a noble character, and be culturally well rounded. In order to carry out this philosophy, he had an exact method of teaching. Students studied a variety of topics to contribute to their practical wisdom--matters necessary in forming political, social, and ethical judgments. In addition, technical matters were an important aspect of his teaching, giving students resources to use when creating their own compositions. The third aspect of Isocrates' program was practical application, with students continually writing and criticizing speeches. Finally, imitation was used as a means of perfection, but only with students who had successfully completed the other areas. (Thirty-three notes are included.) (SR)

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Isocrates' Philosophy of Education

Many scholars categorize Isocrates as a sophist.¹ In fact, Isocrates has at times even categorized himself as a sophist,² but has also clarified the distinction between the two teaching methods.³ Due to the differences between him and the sophists, he commonly referred to himself as a philosopher.⁴ Not in the sense of philosophy that most people are familiar with today in which one attempts to discover the knowledge of virtue or good, but the philosophy of practical wisdom.⁵ The ideas surrounding the of learning practical wisdom characterize Isocrates philosophy of education.

According to Isocrates, an education in oratory should teach the students how to speak well, which in turn will teach them to make sensible judgements, demonstrate a noble character and be culturally well-rounded. Isocrates provided this type of rhetorical education in his school. In a narrow sense, he was producing good orators. But through public speaking, he also taught them how to think and live well.⁶ Speech guides all of the other disciplines, and in turn shapes a person into a better human being. Isocrates states,

in other powers we possess, as I have already said on a former occasion, we are in no respect superior to other living creatures; nay, we are inferior to many in swiftness and in strength and in other resources; but, because there has been implanted in us the power to persuade each other and to make clear to each other whatever we desire, not only have we escaped the life of wild beasts, but we have come together and founded cities and made laws and invented arts; and, generally speaking, there is no institution devised by man that the power of speech has not

helped us establish. . . . Through this we educate the ignorant and appraise the wise; for the power to speak well is the surest sign of sound understanding, and discourse which is true and lawful and just is the outward image of a true and faithful soul.⁷

By teaching oratory, Isocrates was producing educated individuals, not just eloquent speakers.

In teaching oratory, Isocrates' *paideia* influences his teaching. The most important feature of this is that human nature is not capable of determining a real science of what to do and say. (Note, Isocrates always thinks of speech and action as one.) Isocrates states, "I consider that the kind of art which can implant honesty and justice in depraved natures has never existed and does not now exist. . . .⁸ So there can only be a practical wisdom. Practical wisdom does not deal with exact knowledge, but instead only opinion and belief. The right opinion is not an exact science, but it can be taught through oratory.⁹ Isocrates felt that the human mind had a faculty which could put together brilliant thoughts and rhythmic phrases to achieve the desired outcome without claiming exact knowledge. He states,

For I hold that to obtain a knowledge of the elements out of which we make and compose all discourses is not so very difficult if anyone entrusts himself, not to those who make rash promises, but to those who have some knowledge of these things.¹⁰

By going through the proper training, a person could learn the art of oratory which will in turn give him the capacity to form sensible judgements. And, a wise person who understands oratory, will also produce judgements that produce the correct actions.¹¹

Through this training, Isocrates main goal was to introduce men of culture into Greek society instead of those polished with rhetoric alone. Men of culture had to be wise, well-mannered, and noble; but these were achieved and displayed through the study of topics important to Greek culture.¹²

When anyone elects to speak or write discourses which are worthy of praise and honour, it is not conceivable that he will support causes which are unjust or petty or devoted to private quarrels, and not rather those which are great and honourable, devoted to the welfare of man and our common good. for if he fails to find causes of this character, he will accomplish nothing to the purpose.¹³

Isocrates' aim was for these matters "to deal with the world of Hellas, with affairs of state, and are appropriate to be delivered at the Pan-Hellenic assemblies."¹⁴ His students were consumed with this idea, through his speeches and political pamphlets stressing the idea of a unified Greece both culturally and politically.¹⁵

In teaching his notion of Pan-Hellenism, Isocrates wanted to produce statesmen to carry out his ideas. He hoped his students could give a new direction to the misguided Greeks¹⁶ He had two reasons for wanting this to work: natural succession of government and demonstration of his philosophy.

First, Isocrates wanted to preserve Athens. He thought he could accomplish this by shaping future statesmen with new ideas to save the country.

[T]he government of the state is handed on by the older men to

the youth of the coming generation; and that since the succession goes on without end, it follows of necessity that as is the education of our youth so from generation to generation will be the fortune of the state.¹⁷

By educating his students for these positions he could have them carry on his ideas. There were those who opposed unifying the Greek city-states with Athens as the capital, but Isocrates felt educated men would see the benefits and bring Athens to its appropriate status.¹⁸

In producing statesmen, he demonstrated his philosophy of practical wisdom. Isocrates did not teach anything in his school that did not have an immediate use for either speech or action.¹⁹ Ideally he wanted to produce politicians, but that was not always possible. When discussing his students he states,

some of them have been turned out competent champions and others able teachers; while those who have preferred to live in private have become more gracious in their social intercourse than before, and keener judges of discourses and more keener counsellors than most.²⁰

Ultimately, Isocrates was concerned with shaping the average cultivated Athenian because only the best could be statesmen.

In an attempt to produce an educated person, Isocrates had few prerequisites for entrance into his school. As previously stated, he did want the boys to be competent in mathematics and science. The purpose of these studies was for what he termed "gymnastics of the mind." He discusses subjects such as geometry and astronomy and says,

these disciplines are different in their nature from the other studies which make up our education; for the other branches avail us only after we have gained a knowledge of them. whereas these studies can be of no benefit to us after we have mastered them unless we have elected to make our living from this source, and only help us while we are in the process of learning. For while we are occupied with the subtlety and exactness of astronomy and geometry and are forced to apply our minds to difficult problems, . . . we gain the power, after being disciplined and sharpened on these disciplines of grasping and learning more easily and more quickly those subjects which are of more importance and of greater power.²¹

Isocrates believed that these subjects and others were preparation to more serious subjects. For this reason he was the first to require his students to be competent in these areas before entrance.²²

The other quality he looked for in his students prior to training was natural ability. A teacher can instruct a student, but without natural ability, that student will only reach a certain level effectiveness. Those with the proper combination of both talent and training can reach perfection.²³ The proper combination according to Isocrates was first, natural aptitude; second, training and master knowledge of the subject; and third, practical application of the art.²⁴

There were several characteristics of Isocrates' school which demonstrated his philosophy on education. All of them are important, but studying a variety of topics probably contributes most to his idea of practical wisdom. He taught a variety of subjects from political science to psychology to literature. The purpose was to have the students learn matters necessary in forming political, social, and ethical judgements.²⁵ Isocrates did not

necessarily lecture on all of these topics. They were usually recommended reading which Isocrates would supplement with his knowledge.²⁶ The purpose behind this background was to prepare the students to speak on practical subjects that were concerned with the largest public interests.²⁷ This would eventually contribute to the making of statesmen.

Another important aspect of an education was the teaching of technical matters. This gave the students the resources which to choose from when creating their compositions. When discussing the importance of theory, Isocrates states,

Again, every one of you could name many of your schoolfellows who when they were boys seemed to be the dullest among their companions, but who growing older outstripped them farther in intelligence and in speech than they had lagged behind them when they were boys. From this fact you can best judge what training can do; for it is evident that when they were young they all possessed such mental powers as they were born with, but as they grew to be men, these outstripped the others and changed places with them. . . .²⁸

So, even though a student has natural ability, he or she also needs training to help it mature. But the students needed to apply the training to the composition of their own speeches, not just listen to Isocrates' speeches.

As previously mentioned, the third aspect of Isocrates' program was practical application. The purpose of composing the speeches was to learn the most effective methods. This could only be accomplished through criticism that accompanied the composition. In "Against the Sophists," Isocrates criticized not only the sophists, but also teachers of political discourse because they teach it as an exact science not an art that depends

on the circumstances. He states, "they do not attribute any of this power either to practical experience or to the native ability of the student, but undertake to transmit the science of discourse as simply as they would teach the letters of the alphabet."²⁹ Along with the need to write speeches, the students also learned to be critics. Isocrates and his students deliberated over his own speeches and student speeches.³⁰ Through the continuous writing and rewriting of speeches the students learned the correct ways in composing speeches.

The last degree of Isocrates' teaching was imitation as a means of perfection. These were only for the students who had successfully completed the other areas.³¹ One reason Isocrates utilized this technique was because his theoretical knowledge was not as strong as his practical. So through exercises of this nature, he helped students perfect their work.³² This method of teaching was only secondary, for Isocrates' main goal was for students to develop speeches through their own methods.³³

In his school, Isocrates attempted to create a wise and educated person, not just an orator. This was crucial in helping his ultimate cause of Pan-Hellenism, for by creating statesmen or at least concerned citizens they could get his message out to Athens. His philosophy centers around the fact that teaching speech is not an exact science, but an art of opinions and beliefs that will educate the student to make sensible choices in life and speech. In order to carry out his philosophy, he has an exact method of teaching which includes training and practical application. Due to these factors, Isocrates has made a great impact on education.

Notes

- ¹Werner Wilhelm Jaeger, Paideia: The Ideas of Greek Culture, vol. 3 trans. Gilbert Hight (New York, New York: Oxford University Press, 1944) 48.
- ²Isocrates, "Antidosis," Isocrates II, trans. George Norlin, eds. T. E. Page, E. Capps, and W. H. D. Rose (New York, New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1929) 309.
- ³Isocrates, "Panathenaicus," Isocrates II, trans. George Norlin, eds. T. E. Page, E. Capps, and W. H. D. Rose (New York, New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1929) 385.
- ⁴Donald Lemen Clark, Rhetoric in Greco-Roman Education (Morningside Heights, New York: Columbia University Press, 1957) 52.
- ⁵Jaeger 149. Also see Kenneth J. Freeman, Schools of Hellas (New York, New York: Teachers College Press, 1969) 184-85. H. I. Morrou, A History of Education in Antiquity, trans. George Lamb (New York, New York: Sheed and Ward, Inc., 1956) 88-9.
- ⁶Clark 64.
- ⁷Isocrates, "Antidosis" 327.
- ⁸Isocrates, "Antidosis" 337.
- ⁹Jaeger 149.
- ¹⁰Isocrates, "Sophists" 173.
- ¹¹Freeman 184-85.
- ¹²Freeman 192.
- ¹³Isocrates, "Antidosis" 237-39.
- ¹⁴Isocrates, "Antidosis" 213.
- ¹⁵Berquist 253.
- ¹⁶Jaeger 51-52.

- 17 Isocrates, "Antidosis" 285.
- 18 Isocrates, "Antidosis" 351-52.
- 19 Isocrates, "Antidosis" 333.
- 20 Isocrates, "Anitdosis" 301.
- 21 Isocrates, "Antidosis" 331-33.
- 22 Russell H. Wagner, "The Rhetorical Theory of Isocrates," The Quarterly Journal of Speech Education 8 (1922): 327.
- 23 Isocrates, "Antidosis" 291.
- 24 Isocrates, "Antidosis" 293.
- 25 R. Johnson, "Isocrates' Methods of Teaching," American Journal of Philosophy 80 (1959): 26.
- 26 Johnson 30-31.
- 27 Richard Claverhouse Jebb, The Attic Orators from Antiphon to Isaeus (London, England: MacMillan and Co., 1876): 40-41.
- 28 Isocrates, "Anitdosis" 303.
- 29 Isocrates, "Sophists" 169.
- 30 Isocrates, "Sophists" 18.
- 31 Wagner 329.
- 32 Jebb 433.
- 33 Jebb 46.

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